

And one thing is clear—those efforts were not enough. We are still not getting straight answers from the VA. We are still getting out-of-date information. We still do not have a plan from the VA to care for the veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan.

So yes, there were hearings—I think we'd all agree that after a \$3 billion error that hurt our veterans there better be hearings—but they were not enough. And we need more oversight and more accountability if we're going to make sure veterans do not get hurt again.

The Senator from Idaho asked—why now? Why am I calling for more oversight now? Because the GAO just released its report. I didn't tell the GAO how long to take in its investigation. When it had the facts, it released them, and I spoke up immediately. In fact, I think the Senator from Idaho will remember the morning the GAO released its report I shared the results with our Veterans Affairs Committee at a public hearing.

I thought everyone on the committee needed to know immediately that government investigators found the VA had not told us about the problems it knew about and that the VA is providing quarterly reports that are late and based on old information. Simply put, I spoke out when we got the facts.

I would add that if anyone believes that my remarks on Tuesday are the first time I have stood up and spoke out for our veterans—they just have not had their eyes open over the past few years. And I would remind my colleagues that there is no moratorium on speaking out for our veterans. Whenever we learn facts that affect America's veterans, I'm going to share them, and I'm not going to stop speaking out until we in Congress do the right thing.

Furthermore, unless we change the path we are on, we will be talking about this issue next September, the September after that, and every month in between. This is not going away.

So we in the Senate debate a lot of issues—none more significant than the issue of going to war. We are at war, and this body has a responsibility to meet our obligations in prosecuting that war—that includes taking care of our veterans. Today, we are not meeting that obligation. That is not just my opinion. It is the only conclusion a reasonable person could draw from the GAO report. And however inconvenient that may be—that is a fact.

Mr. President, I repeat my conclusion from my remarks here on Tuesday. Veterans deserve better, and this Senate and America can do better.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia is recognized.

AGRICULTURAL DISASTERS

Mr. CHAMBLISS. Mr. President, I rise to express my support for providing relief to agricultural producers nationwide.

Earlier today Senator CONRAD from North Dakota led a debate on the floor regarding agricultural disasters; especially the severe drought causing severe loss of crops all across America, and the need to extend a helping hand to farmers.

We always hope to stay out of the disaster business, unfortunately Mr. President, this has indeed been a very unusual year. In August of 2006, in my State of Georgia, 155 of 159 counties were designated by the Secretary of Agriculture as primary natural disaster areas due to losses caused by drought and excessive temperatures.

Cotton and peanut harvests are underway today in the State and, unfortunately, the Department of Agriculture's most recent crop summary rates dryland fields in poor to fair condition, with much lower yields than usual. If peanut production forecasts are realized, we could have the lowest production yields on peanuts since 1980. Losses extend beyond the fields and have had a serious effect on livestock producers as well. For example, in addition to losses due to drought, many pastures and hayfields have experienced severe armyworm infestation.

My staff continues to receive calls from across the State with concerns about crop and pasture conditions. I have personally heard the calls and seen the need for agricultural disaster assistance throughout Georgia. As chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, I convened eight farm bill hearings across the country this summer. I will have to say that in traveling to these regions and visiting with the producers, I can report that there has been severe disasters occurring in each and every section of our country from an agricultural standpoint. Rural America is hurting.

While the Senate did not have the opportunity today to proceed with the vote on this very important issue, I want to be clear that I do support disaster assistance. Earlier this year, the Senate passed disaster assistance in the fiscal year 2006 supplemental appropriations bill. Unfortunately, that provision was dropped in conference. Since then, the situation has greatly worsened. Fortunately, we currently have a disaster package in the Senate agriculture appropriations bill, which we expect to complete after the November elections.

The appropriate place to address agriculture disaster is in the agriculture appropriations bill. However, we will need to refine and improve this disaster package based upon current circumstances. For example, the current disaster package provides assistance only for losses for the 2005 crop-year. Unfortunately, the losses in 2006 appear to be more extensive, more widespread, and more severe than the 2005 losses. The University of Georgia Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development estimates that at this point agriculture production losses may total over \$819 million in Georgia alone.

At the current time, we may not know the full extent of the 2006 crop damage, but it is evident in looking across the country that crop and livestock assistance is needed.

The Secretary of Agriculture has agreed with us on this point. Earlier this summer he announced in the Dakotas that a disaster indeed had taken place across America. However, he provided what I thought, frankly, was a fairly nominal response to the issue.

America's farmers provide this country the safest, most affordable food and fiber supply of any country in the world. It is our duty to stand by them in this time of need.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Iowa is recognized.

READING FIRST

Mr. HARKIN. Mr. President, the Education Department's inspector general released a blistering report last week about a program called Reading First. The inspector general reported that Education Department officials, one, mismanaged the program; two, steered school contracts to publishers they favor and away from others; three, flagrantly ignored Federal laws on maintaining local and State control of school curricula.

These are serious findings by the inspector general. Reading First is one of the largest programs in the Education Department. Congress has appropriated about \$5 billion, or about a billion dollars for each of the past 5 years. So when we learn that a program of this size is being mismanaged, that laws are being broken, we need to take pause and investigate further.

Soon after Reading First was created, a number of publishers, researchers, and local school officials complained that the Department favored certain reading programs over others. They claimed that the Department pressured States and local school districts—sometimes subtly and sometimes bluntly—to purchase its preferred programs and reject others.

These kinds of activities are illegal. The law that established the Education Department states:

No provision of a program administered by the Secretary or by any other officer of the Department shall be construed to authorize the Secretary or any such officer to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution, school, or school system . . . over the selection or consent of . . . textbooks, or other instructional materials by any educational institution or school system, except to the extent authorized by law.

Now, when we established the Department of Education—and I happened to be here at that time; I was in the House of Representatives at that time—the hue and cry went up to those who were opposed to establishing the Department of Education that the Department of Education would begin telling local school districts what to

teach, what books to use. Well, none of us wanted that. We wanted the Department of Education to do certain things but not to control local schools. We wanted to leave the control of school curricula, textbooks, what they taught, in the hands of local school boards. So we put this in the law expressly forbidding the Secretary of Education, or anyone in that Department, to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over textbooks, and things like that. That is about as clear as night is from day in the law.

Later, when we passed the No Child Left Behind Act, we further elaborated on that, and No Child Left Behind established the Reading First Program. It reiterates this point:

No funds provided to the Department under this act may be used by the Department to endorse, approve, or sanction any curriculum.

The Department officials repeatedly denied that they showed any favoritism. However, the inspector general's report shows that, in fact, they went to great lengths to influence exactly which instructional materials school districts must use. They accomplished this in several ways.

First they—I mean the Department of Education officials—stacked their grant review panels with members who shared their own philosophy, directly contradicting the No Child Left Behind Act which laid out specific rules designed to ensure the panels were balanced.

Next, they designed the grant applications in such a way as to discourage States from using certain reading programs—reading programs that had been approved at the local level and had been approved at the State level. So the Department designed the applications in such a way as to discourage the States from using these reading programs, even to the point of selectively eliminating phrases from the No Child Left Behind Act they didn't like. The No Child Left Behind Act put in certain phrases they had to use in terms of getting grants. Guess what. They just left those out of the grant application—just left them out totally.

Third, they leaned heavily on school districts to drop reading programs that didn't meet the Department's approval. For example, the Reading First Director opposed a whole-language reading program sold by a company called the Wright Group. In an e-mail, he urged a staffer to make it clear that the Wright Group didn't have his approval. Here is an excerpt from his e-mail. This is an e-mail from the Reading First Director Christopher Doherty. He said:

They—

This is the group that wanted to come in and make an application—

They are trying to crash our party and we need to beat the [expletive deleted] out of them in front of all the other would-be party crashers who are standing on the front lawn waiting to see how we welcome these dirtbags.

What does all that mean? That means: Look, we have our programs,

we have what we want; others want in and, guess what, we are going to keep them out. "They are trying to crash our party"—"our party." What did Mr. Doherty mean by "crash our party"? They have selected publishers, selected materials they want these schools to use. "Party"? What does that mean?

Here is how it played out in Massachusetts for one State. The Reading First Director, this same guy, Christopher Doherty, called a State official to say he had concerns about certain reading programs that four school districts were using. All of these programs had gone through the appropriate approval process at the local and State levels. Nevertheless, the State official conveyed that concern to the local districts. The three that dropped those approved programs continued to get their Reading First funding. The one district that stuck with the old program that had been approved had its Reading First funding taken away.

What is that saying? It is saying: OK, school districts, if you want money, you have to play our ball game, you have to accept our textbooks, you have to accept what we want, not what you at the local, what you at the State level want, but what we want in Washington.

When we step back and look at the big picture, we see a Department of Education where the attitude is: We know best, and to heck with Congress, to heck with Federal laws. They are saying basically it doesn't matter what the law says about local control of schools. If we like a particular program, we are going to make sure a school uses it, and if we don't like it, we are going to make sure they don't use it; we know best, and we will decide. That seems to be the attitude of the Department of Education.

We live in a nation of law. We have offices such as the inspector general to investigate whether agencies such as the Education Department are really following the laws we pass. Guess what. The inspector general found they are not following the law at the Education Department. They are basically thumbing their nose at it.

So far, the person who has borne most of the blame has been the Reading First Director, Christopher Doherty, but I think we need to look a little higher.

Secretary Spellings responded to the report by blaming other Department employees and noting that the events occurred before she took over the Department. However, as President Bush's domestic policy adviser, she exerted enormous control from the White House over the Department of Education activities.

Michael Petrilli, a former Department official who worked in the Department from 2001 to 2005, wrote a column this week in which he said that Mrs. Spellings knew exactly what was going on.

Here is what Mr. Petrilli wrote:

As the President's first-term domestic policy adviser, she micromanaged the imple-

mentation of Reading First from her West Wing office. She put one of her most trusted friends inside the Department of Education to make sure that Doherty and his colleagues didn't go soft and allow just any reading program to receive funds. She was the leading cheerleader for an aggressive approach. And now she bobs and weaves: "Although these events occurred before I became Secretary of Education, I am concerned about these actions and committed to addressing and resolving them."

A quote from Secretary Spellings.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CORNYN). The Senator's time has expired.

Mr. HARKIN. Mr. President, I didn't realize I had a time limit. I ask for 2 more minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. HARKIN. Mr. President, if this description is accurate, it is hard to imagine that Secretary Spellings didn't know anything about the abuses described in the inspector general's report. Instead of making others take the fall for what happened, she needs to stand up and say whether she had any knowledge of or involvement in these activities when she worked in the White House.

Last week's report from the IG was just the first of several on the Education Department's management of the Reading First Program. I am afraid that what we have learned so far is just the tip of the iceberg. Secretary Spellings needs to explain as soon as possible her role in this program.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Idaho.

IN HONOR OF WORLD WAR II VETERANS—PHOTOGRAPHER JOE ROSENTHAL AND ACTOR GLENN FORD

Mr. CRAIG. Mr. President, in my capacity as a Senator and chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I rise this evening to pay tribute to two men who were bookends of what has been termed the "greatest generation," those Americans who served in World War II. One stood behind the lens and took that famous photo on Iwo Jima that became the iconic picture of the war in the Pacific. The other gave up his life in front of the lens and laid his life on the line in the cause for freedom in Europe. I speak, of course, of the photographer Joe Rosenthal and the famed actor Glenn Ford. Both men died a few weeks ago, and it is fitting that this body, the Senate of the United States, recognize these great men for their contributions.

Most Americans instantly know that image Joe Rosenthal captured: the photo of five marines and one Navy corpsman raising the flag—the American flag—over Iwo Jima. That image became the basis for the Iwo Jima Memorial which rises above Arlington National Cemetery and a copy of which greets those who enter Quantico Marine Base in Virginia. That image was